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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses how race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and area of residence, whether urban, suburban, or rural, impact girls' sports experiences. The social context of girls' lives shapes their sports choices and opportunities, with financial restraints often restricting African American girls' opportunities. When access to sports is possible, all girls appear to derive positive benefits from exercise and athletic involvement, although they perceive the benefits differently based on their experiences and social contexts. Because low-income girls of color have their sports opportunities through schools, recreation departments, and nonprofit agencies, their participation is usually limited to the stereotypical popular sports of basketball and track and field, in which African American girls are over-represented. Economic class and racial and gender stratification also significantly impact the participation of women of color in sports leadership positions, including coaching and sports administration. In general, girls who participate in sports experience higher than average levels of self-esteem, and research suggests that higher rates of athletic participation or exercise were significantly related to postponing intercourse and lower rates of sexual activity and pregnancy. There is also a positive academic relationship between sports involvement and academic achievement, although there are great differences among groups. Sports participation reduced dropping out for rural Latina athletes and suburban and rural white athletes, but not for urban female athletes or African American girls from any area. Nor was there any correlation between occupational success and sports participation. Overall, the benefits of participation in athletics indicates that schools, community organizations, and sports organizations need to take steps to increase and improve the sports experiences of young women. (Contains eight references.) (SLD)

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THE ATHLETIC EXPERIENCES OF ETHNICALLY DIVERSE GIRLS

Girls' involvement in school- and community-based athletic programs has grown since the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. The Amendments require institutions receiving Federal funding to provide equal athletic opportunity for both sexes. Today, girls make up about 37 percent of all high school athletes, and one girl in three participates in sports. Despite these gains, girls' sports programs still receive a disproportionately smaller share of resources than boys', and girls have fewer opportunities to participate in school- and community-based organizations.

This digest discusses how race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and area of residence (urban, suburban, rural) impact on girls' sports experiences.

The Effects of Socioeconomic Status on Girls' Sports Participation

Access

The social context of girls' lives profoundly shapes their sports choices and opportunities, with financial constraints often restricting African American girls' opportunities. For example, depressed socioeconomic conditions, which impact girls of color disproportionately, prevent families from funding their children's athletic activities. The Wilson Report (Wilson Sporting Goods Co. & the Women's Sport Foundation, 1988), based on a nationwide sample of 500 families, found that although African American and white girls were equally likely to participate in sports, 33 percent of African American girls, compared with 18 percent of white girls, said their families could not afford to pay for equipment and lessons. White girls are also three times as likely as African American girls to be involved in sports through a private organization (21 percent compared with 7 percent), while African American girls more often participate through their school (65 percent compared to 50 percent). Almost one-half of the African American girls, compared with one-quarter of the white girls, said their families could not even cover their transportation costs.

Further, low-income girls may lack information about the importance of exercise, diet, and sports. They are also less likely to receive quality physical education and athletic training at a young age, which erodes the foundation of subsequent motor development (President's Council, 1997). Many live in environments that are unhealthy or unsafe, making walking or jogging in their neighborhood—exercise that involves little expense—hazardous. Finally, poor families rely on their daughters to provide childcare for younger siblings after school and to prepare family meals, thus limiting their time for sports.

Quality of Experience

All girls appear to derive positive benefits from exercise and athletic involvement, although they perceive the benefits differently based on their experiences and social circumstances. A survey of racial and ethnic diversity in girl scouting (Erkut, Fields, Sing, & Marx, 1996) found that almost one-half of the Native Americans, African Americans, European Americans, Asian Pacific Americans, and Latina female

respondents reported that an athletic activity, such as playing basketball or baseball, swimming, or doing gymnastics, made them feel good about themselves. However, there were significant differences among the girls based on race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), and area of residence (urban/rural). For example, high-SES Asian Pacific girls in urban areas most frequently reported positive feelings, followed by middle-SES and then low-SES Asian Pacific girls. Also reporting such positive feelings was a group with very different demographics: low-SES Native American girls living in rural areas or on reservations. The reasons why athletic activities made girls feel good about themselves differed according to their demographics: the high SES Asian Pacific girls were more likely to report that sports gave them a sense of mastery and enjoyment, whereas the low SES Native American girls indicated that sports provided opportunities to be with friends.

Limitations on Women in Sports

Type of Sport

Generally, because low-income girls of color have sports opportunities through schools, recreation departments, and other non-profit agencies, their participation is limited to stereotypical "popular" sports: basketball and track and field. In fact, approximately 90 percent of African American female college athletes who receive scholarships in Division I NCAA schools participate in these two sports (Smith, 1993). These sports are not always of primary interest to African American females; those surveyed in one study actually held negative attitudes toward track and field, instead preferring swimming, volleyball, tennis, gymnastics, badminton, and dance. Nevertheless, limited resources, combined with lack of diverse sports opportunities, have contributed to the overrepresentation of African American girls in track and field and basketball, thus perpetuating racial stereotyping that they naturally excel at only certain sports (Smith, 1993).

Leadership Opportunities

Economic class and racial and gender stratification also significantly impact the participation of women of color in sports leadership positions. Women of color represent less than 5 percent of all coaching, teaching, and sports administration positions (Smith, 1993).

A study of gender and ethnicity in coaching in Michigan (Ewing, Seefeldt, & Chapin, 1991) found that only 35 percent of the girls' interscholastic sport teams, and two percent of the boys' teams, were coached by women. Of the women coaches, over 90 percent were white, five percent were African American, and less than one percent were either Asian American, Latina, or Native American. Interestingly, prior to the passage of Title IX, most girls' interscholastic teams were coached by women. So while girls have increased sports opportunities since Title IX, the opportunities for women in administrative and leadership positions have decreased.

The lack of minority women coaches and sports administrators can be especially detrimental to young minority

women athletes. Female coaches serve a function for female athletes that goes beyond the technical aspects of coaching; they strongly influence the values, achievement level, productivity, and career orientation of their athletes (Seefeldt, Ewing, & Walk, 1993).

The Effects of Sports Participation on Girls

Social

In general, all girls who participate in sports experience higher than average levels of self-esteem. Sports can build confidence and a positive body image, which are linked to lower levels of depression. Indeed, a Women's Sports Foundation survey (1989) demonstrates the differential but mostly positive effect for African American, Latina, and white high school athletes, compared to non-athletic girls. All girls surveyed derived social benefits from athletic participation, particularly increased popularity and extracurricular and community involvement.

Possibly of even greater importance, the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports report (1997) cites two research studies that suggest higher female rates of athletic participation or exercise were significantly related to postponing first experiences with intercourse and lower rates of both sexual activity and pregnancy.

Academic

Overall, there is a positive relationship between sports involvement and academic achievement as measured by grade point average, standardized test scores, lowered risk for dropping out, and greater likelihood of attending and staying in college, although there are great differences among groups of girls. For example, the Women's Sports Foundation (1989) found that sports participation was significantly associated with higher grades for rural Latina athletes, while for all African American and white female athletes in all geographic locations, athletic participation was unrelated to higher grades.

With regard to dropping out, sports participation significantly reduced the dropout rate for rural Latina athletes and suburban and rural white female athletes. It did not, however, lower the rate for any girls in urban areas, nor for African American girls in any geographic area. The researchers speculated that the social and personal benefits of sport participation simply could not counteract the problems in urban schools and communities (Women's Sports Foundation, 1989).

Career Aspirations

The Women's Sports Foundation (1989) also found, surprisingly, that high school participation had no positive influence on the occupational success or aspirations of girls of any ethnicity who entered the labor market four years after high school. In fact, the labor market status of urban African American females who had participated in athletics in high school compared to African American non-athletes actually eroded: only five percent of the African American female athletes held high status jobs (i.e., management trainee, clerk, secretary, mail carrier) compared to 59 percent of their non-athletic counterparts. Foundation researchers speculated that this troublesome finding may result from high school athletes' spending out-of-school time practicing and attending games, while non-athletes were working at part-time jobs and gaining valuable work experience.

Recommendations

Schools, community organizations, and sports organizations need to take steps to increase and improve the sport experiences of young women. Efforts can include the following:

- Actively recruit low-income girls of color for existing sports programs. Coaches need to consider differences in girls' reasons for participation and how economic hardship and family responsibilities impact on their ability to participate. For example, families can be put in touch with resources (e.g., baby sitting, subsidized transportation, etc.) to enable daughters to participate more fully in athletics.
- Set up scholarship and aid programs to provide low-income girls with lessons and training in individualized sports such as swimming, tennis, ice skating, and gymnastics.
- Develop programs to help young women integrate school-work, sports, and after-school jobs.
- Intensify efforts to hire women of color as coaches and sports administrators.
- Expand sports research to account for the diversity in girls' experiences in athletics to better understand the experiences of all girls.
- Be more sensitive to racial stereotyping in women's sports, and expand opportunities for girls of color to participate in a wider array of athletic activities.

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